"Call me by my name":
Names, address, and identities of Korean women

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The complexity of selecting an appropriate form of address in Korean cannot be overstated. While the process of negotiating the terms usually requires only a few brief exchanges, the entanglements of power, status, intimacy, and expectations which transpire within those moments require high social cognizance, cultural sensitivity, and personal awareness that take years to be socialized into. The tenor that is set in the early stages of an interaction often persists long into the relationship, and some speakers may continue using the initially selected terms of address despite possible changes in status over time. Within frames of this demanding social practice, there is no form of address more risky and potentially more rewarding than that of personal names.

Personal names in South Korea are subject to avoidance and restrictions in use grounded int the asymmetric relations of power and age that constitute the social and linguistic ideologies of the country (Brown 2015; King 2006). At the same time, as lexical items whose positioning within the Korean referential hierarchy allows them to assume more directly referential roles, similar to pronouns, while retaining a conventional denotation characteristic of symbols, such as kinterms, names have the unique reformational power to change normative social practice (Fleming & Slotta 2015; Fleming 2011). Their mobility within the referential hierarchy enables forms of intentional and reflexive practice situated in spatiotemporal settings of speech events (Ball 2018). In turn, the socio-pragmatic boundaries derived from such a setting impose constraints on the movement of names within the system of address, ultimately delimiting their performance. The resulting boundaries are not readily permeable but are also not impenetrable.

As this study aims to show, the affordances provided by the unique status of names in the Korean referential hierarchy allow speakers to (re)negotiate the parameters of the relationship indexed by a particular speech event and reposition themselves in the wider chronotopic setting (Agha 2015; Bakhtin 1981) through performance on the smaller scale of interaction. This study focuses primarily on female speakers, since negotiation of this sort is often at odds with the process by which Korean women are linguistically socialized (Duff 2010) into extant systems of address emblematic of social institutions, such as the family, and liminal life events, such as adulthood, marriage, and motherhood. The selection and usage of names over other available and approved alternatives is interpreted as movement of Korean women towards greater visibility and subject-positions in both microscale interactions and macrosocial spatiotemporal settings and institutions.

This phenomenon is explored through interviews and open ethnographic observation (Copland & Creese 2017) of thirty Korean women from different social and regional background, as they navigate the thin line between normative social propriety and personal identity performance and maintenance within the spatiotemporal setting of Korea's compressed modernity (Chang 2010). The study findings suggest that the practice of usage and avoidance of names is undergoing transgenerational change to reflect the equally changing position of women in the country, simultaneously altering the internal structure of the Korean system of address. Although the study traverses the intersection of gender and power relations, its ultimate focus is sociolinguistic in nature, aiming to circumscribe a unique linguistic phenomenon unfolding within a unique social setting.

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